

When Virtue Bids Us Abandon Life (*Ennead* VI 8 [39] 6, 14-26)

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## I

The theme of the present paper lies at the point of convergence of two much debated issues in Plotinian exegesis. The first debate, to which the honorand of this volume has signally contributed, centres on the nature of Plotinus' ethics. Is Plotinus' ethics an ethics of other-worldly detachment, calling on the soul in us to fly from the evils of the world below and, by turning inwards, to rise to the higher realities from which she is emanated and whose traces she bears within herself?<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, does Plotinus include norms of other-regarding conduct in the advice he gives to the incarnate soul by telling her to fly, not indeed from 'life on earth', but from 'wickedness',<sup>2</sup> with the result that a life of action and political engagement may be seen as 'a consequence and expression of the union reached with the One'?<sup>3</sup> The second debate centres on the interpretation of Plotinus' stated views on suicide.<sup>4</sup> Did Plotinus change his mind on the justifiability of suicide, moving from the position stated in I 9 [16], where he argues that self-inflicted death is hardly ever defensible, to that held in I 4 [46], where he appears to concede that it may be a rational solution to a range of circumstances so desperate as to preclude the achievement of *eudaimonia*?<sup>5</sup> Is John Rist justified in holding that Plotinus' consistently held opinion was that the soul should always choose to stay in the body, and that the differences between the two tractates can, without too much difficulty, be explained by the fact that, whereas in I 4 [46] Plotinus notes that men of a common nature (*koinē physis*) may well contemplate suicide as an escape from such ills as being captured as a war-slave, he argues in I 9 [16] that virtuous men (*spoudaioi*), who have

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<sup>1</sup> V I [10] 1.

<sup>2</sup> I.8 [51] 6.10-13.

<sup>3</sup> O'Meara (2003: 76). A critical survey of the vast literature on this subject may be found in S. Stern-Gillet, 'Plotinus' Ethics', in P. Remes and S. Slaveva-Griffin (edd.), *The Handbook of Platonism*, Acumen and The University of California Press, forthcoming 2013.

<sup>4</sup> I say 'stated' to avoid bringing into the discussion of Plotinus' text such biographical and auto-biographical anecdotes as Porphyry chose to include in the *Vita Plotini*. How a philosopher conducts his daily life and the advice he gives his friends (on suicide and other matters) are not directly pertinent to the analysis of the moral views that he may have put forward in his writings. The fact that a philosopher's conduct may on occasion improve upon, or indeed fall short of, the moral standards advocated in his writings is no reason for adjusting our interpretation of his text. For additional reasons to treat Porphyry's biographical information with caution, see O'Meara (2010).

<sup>5</sup> For the view that Plotinus' position on suicide remained unchanged throughout the *Enneads*, see, on the one hand, Rist (1967: 174-77) and Wallis (1972: 84), who interpret his stance as consistently negative, and, on the other hand, Graeser (1972: 66), for whom his position was always close to that of the Stoics. For the view that Plotinus changed his mind, see, e.g., Inge (1929: II 173), Dillon (1994), McGroarty (2007: appendix 2) and Kalogiratos (2009: *passim*). Fronterotta (in Brisson-Pradeau, 2003) remains neutral on the issue.

made themselves immune to the vicissitudes of earthly existence by the practice of the civic and the kathartic virtues, are possessed of the necessary stamina to bear their sufferings until such time as the union of their soul and body is dissolved through natural causes? Alternatively, as John Dillon concludes at the end of an intricate argument, did Plotinus come to regard suicide as an acceptable way out of hopeless conditions after he had fully developed the doctrine of the impassibility of the soul *qua* soul? Indeed if, as Plotinus consistently held, the true self is identical with the higher soul, and if, as he came to believe, the soul, by its very nature, is impervious to any change taking place in the body to which she is joined, it follows that the soul can reach *eudaimonia* without the direct participation of the body. In the terminology of the tractate *On Well-Being* (I 4 [46] 16.17sq), the virtuous man (*spoudaios*)<sup>6</sup> will care for the body as long as possible (*phrontiei kai anexetai, heōs dunaton*), but will ‘abandon it in nature’s good time.’<sup>7</sup> Because he knows that his true self is other (*autos de ōn allos*) than the body, the *spoudaios* also knows that he is capable of being noetically active without it. He is therefore not to be prevented (*ou kōluomenos*) from letting go of what is no more for him than an alien cover. As reconstructed by Dillon, Plotinus’ position on suicide at the time of composing this relatively late tractate is closer to that of the Stoics than it had been in his earlier writings.

In spite of their disagreement over Plotinus’ attitude to suicide, Rist and Dillon agree on one thing: they both assume that illness and enslavement are typical circumstances in which withdrawal from the body might be considered - Rist to deny that a Plotinian *spoudaios* would yield to them, Dillon to assert that he very well might. What neither scholar appears to have considered is the possibility that such a character might deliberately choose to jettison his body for the sake of preserving the independence of his soul, not only from passion, but also from whatever dishonourable action might otherwise be imposed upon him in the world of sense.

In the pages that follow I shall proceed to an analysis of two short passages from the tractate *On Free Will and the Will of the One* (VI 8 [39]), which appear to me to shed some light, however modest, on these two problems.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this article *ho spoudaios* will consistently be rendered as ‘the virtuous man’ and *ho agathos anthrōpos* as ‘the good man’.

<sup>7</sup> Except when otherwise indicated, all quotations from the *Enneads* are in Armstrong’s translation, with occasional modifications, flagged as such.

## II

The tractate as a whole is devoted to working out whether the One, which cannot be other than it is, can nonetheless be said to be free. To hone his concepts for this important investigation, Plotinus devotes six closely argued chapters to an enquiry into the nature and extent of human freedom or what is ‘in our power’ (*to eph’ hēmin*). The exacting criteria that he sets for human freedom lead him to reject as altogether outside our power - or at least largely so - not only such decisions and actions as are prompted solely by passion or false opinion, but also all those which proceed from a combination of factors inside and outside the soul *qua* soul. In Plotinus’ point of view, we are not fully the authors of our actions when we are driven by impulse (*hormē*), or by desire of any kind (*hētis orexis*), or by chance imaginations roused by the power of body, or when our action proceeds from deliberation undertaken in ignorance of relevant aspects of the situation, or, more generally, when we act from the necessity of our bodily nature. Even a soul who ‘is active according to intellect and engaged in practical action according to virtue’ (VI 8 [39] 5. 2-3) cannot, according to Plotinus, wholly be granted the power of self-determination (*to autexousion*) since the attainment (*teuxis*) of any action intended to have an impact upon the world of sense ultimately depends on factors outside the agent’s control. Together with the fact that the fruition of even our virtuous actions cannot ever be guaranteed, such considerations lead Plotinus to conclude that:

...everything in the sphere of action (*en praxeī*), even if reason is dominant, is *mixed* (*mikton*) and cannot have being in our power in a *pure* state. (2. 35-37)

As can be seen, Plotinus’ category of the mixed is large, including, as it does, not only behaviour prompted by passion or erroneous opinion, but also actions undertaken in rational response to political and social situations lying outside the agent’s full control. Having an ineradicable element of otherness built into them, such behaviour and actions are not voluntary in the full sense of the term and cannot, for that reason, be said to have the Good *per se* as their aim.

As a result of including in the category of the ‘mixed’ most of the activities that make the incarnate life what it is, Plotinus’ category of the ‘voluntary’ turns out to be exceptionally austere, being exclusively made up of desires roused by noetic thinking and of actions which depend solely on the activities of Intellect and are thus free of bodily interference. However, if the category is exiguous, it is also of the highest value since it consists only of fully self-determining desires and doings, which Plotinus compares to those of the gods. (3.24-26).

Does this mean that human beings are doomed to remain unfree? Not quite. To begin with, Plotinus held consistently, if somewhat implausibly, that some rare human beings can remain unaffected by acquiring a knowledge of evil and, to that extent, enjoy as much of the self-determination of the gods as is compatible with their incarnate condition.<sup>8</sup> More persuasively as well as more directly germane to our present concern, he also argued that the practice of the virtues, civic and kathartic, has a decisive role to play in enabling the many, who are adversely affected by the experience of evil, to achieve, at the very least, a modicum of freedom and, at best, to reach out to the state of god-likeness.

In the re-interpretation of the Platonic distinction between two kinds of virtue that he carries out in the tractate *On Virtues* (I 2 [19]), Plotinus assigns to the civic virtues a range of functions. Chief among them is to ‘set us in order’ (cf. *katakosmousi*, 2.14) and to ensure that each part of the soul plays its allotted part, with reason exercising its rule over appetite and passion. So doing, the civic virtues maintain the health of our soul or restore it after it has become impaired through error or overbearing passion. By cultivating civic courage, moderation, wisdom and justice, Plotinus holds, we build up (*kataskeuadzein*)<sup>9</sup> our freedom and we learn to react appropriately in the face of untoward external circumstances independent of our control. Yet, as will presently be seen, if Plotinus restricts the sphere of influence of the civic virtues mainly to the practical life, he nonetheless assigns them also the higher, propaedeutic, function of preparing the incarnate soul for the process of purification that will make it possible for her to return to Intellect and beyond.

It cannot be over-emphasized that from Plotinus’ point of view the freedom that we secure through the practice of the civic virtues is limited. Whatever the depth of civic courage, moderation, practical wisdom and justice that the incarnate soul succeeds in achieving, she yet remains subject to the causation of the physical universe, and, to that extent, never shakes off its dependence upon chance and circumstances. To say that freedom admits of degrees is platitudinous, of course, but Plotinus’ (probably Stoic) interpretation of this platitude is interesting as well as directly germane to the present argument. The degree

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<sup>8</sup> ‘... if it [the soul] makes haste to escape (*thatton phugēi*) it will have come to no harm (*ouden beblaptai*) by acquiring a knowledge of evil (*gnōsin kakou*) and coming to know (*gnousa*) the nature of wickedness (*physin kakias*).’ (IV 8 [6] 5. 27-29). See also ‘there is an escape from the evils in the soul for those who are capable of it, though not all men are.’ I 8 [51] 5 .

<sup>9</sup> VI 8 [39] 5.32-33.

of our freedom, he holds, is proportionate to the extent of our virtue, which itself coincides with the extent of our disengagement from the soul-body compound. As he had already noted in an early tractate, ‘the better soul has power over more, the worse over less.’ (*On Destiny*, III 1 [3] 8. 14-15). In the context of that tractate, which owes much to Aristotle’s conception of moral virtue, the better soul is one who consistently acts in accordance with right reason and the noetic principles she holds within herself while the worse soul is one who ‘suffers error from ignorance or defeat from the violence of the passions’ (9. 14-15). The distinction between better and worse souls would later be mapped out onto the distinction between the respective functions of civic and kathartic virtues, as drawn in I 2 [19].

Plotinus’ kathartic virtues are those possessed by a soul who has succeeded in purifying herself by stripping away ‘everything that is alien’ (4. 6), in particular the impulsion of the lower nature. To ensure as complete a separation from the body as is humanly possible, the soul engaged in such a process ‘draws together to itself in a sort of place of its own away from the body, and is *wholly unaffected*’ (5. 5-7). As a consequence, and in the absence of constraining untoward circumstances in the world of sense, such a soul has the ability to act alone (cf. *monē energoi*) and is as self-determined, pure and free as it is possible for an incarnate soul to be. Remaining unperturbed by the clamour of the body’s ‘raging sea’,<sup>10</sup> she can share in the activity of Intellect and, to that extent, be god-like. To take but one example: a kathartically just soul is a soul who, as a result of participating in justice itself (*autodikaiosunē*), exhibits ‘the disposition of a unity to itself, a unity in which there are not different parts’ (6.22-23). This kathartic virtue, it cultivates in addition to, or instead of, the civic virtue of justice which consists in the harmonious interaction between the different aspects or parts of the soul.

### III

Having re-interpreted the Platonic distinction between civic and kathartic virtues, Plotinus had to face two problems generated by the propaedeutic function that he had assigned to the civic virtues.<sup>11</sup> The first problem concerns the soul’s motivation for seeking to progress beyond the civic virtues: where will the man of civic virtue find the motivation to purify

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<sup>10</sup> V 1 [10] 2.15.

<sup>11</sup> Rather than assigning a propaedeutic function to the civic virtues, Plato saw their practice either as a means to a conformist and trouble-free existence (*Phaedo*, 68e-69b) or as an instrument of social cohesion (*Republic*, VI 500d7).

himself, if the vision of the realities in Intellect is the end to which the process of purification is directed? How, more particularly, will such a man, who has secured for himself as much freedom and ease as is possible to enjoy in the world below, be prompted to undertake the process of self-purification that will lead him to a state of which he has as yet no, or little, experience? Fellowship with the divine requires, as Plotinus likes to remind us, the ‘stripping away of everything that is alien’ (*aphairesis allotriou pantos*).<sup>12</sup> Under the category of ‘alien’, we may reasonably speculate that he includes possessions, habits, interests of various kinds, attachments to persons and places, in short most of what makes the incarnate life what it is. To be motivated to do away with such comforts, a person needs to have some notion of his soul’s nature and destiny as well as of the end in which his true good lies. Is the man of civic virtue likely to have such a notion? Plotinus’ optimistic answer is that, although the civic virtues mostly serve to guide the incarnate soul in her life below, they also give their possessors intimations of the presence in their soul of imprints (*tupoi*) from the higher world. A soul who becomes aware, however dimly, of the nature of such imprints is a soul who, according to Plotinus, will be prompted to purify herself. ‘Drawing together to herself’ (cf. *synagousan pros heautēn*, 5.6) and thus distancing herself from the body, such a soul will work at minimising the impact that emotions, passions and superfluous desires may have retained upon her. Recognising the imprints of Intellect for what they are, she will understand that she ‘must bring the impressions into accord with the true realities of which they are impressions’,<sup>13</sup> at which point she will be ready to receive the illumination of Intellect and, in the process, to purify herself. Becoming godlike while still in the body, such a soul will, whenever possible, choose the contemplative over the practical life and cultivate the kathartic virtues rather than the civic ones.

The second question, which will turn out to be more difficult than Plotinus may have anticipated, concerns the relationship between the virtues. Could conflicts arise between the practice either of different virtues in each set (civic or kathartic) or, more seriously, between the two sets? The new twist that Plotinus gave to the venerable theory of the unity of the virtues ruled out the possibility of conflicts between the practice of different virtues in each set. Indeed, since, in his viewpoint, the virtues, both civic and kathartic, are likenesses of the exemplars in Intellect and since the exemplars are themselves bound together by relations of

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<sup>12</sup> I 2 [19] 4. 6. See also V 3 [49] 4.

<sup>13</sup> I 2 [19] 4.24-25. See also V 3 [49] 2. The relationship between practical virtue, self-purification and kathartic virtue is further discussed in Flaman (in Brisson-Pradeau: 2003) and Stern-Gillet (2009).

co-presence and mutual implication, no virtuous agent could ever find himself in a position of having to choose between, for instance, courage and moderation, be it at the civic or the kathartic level. In Plotinus' own words, the virtues in each set 'imply one another reciprocally (*antakolouthousi*) in the same way as the exemplars There in Intellect.'<sup>14</sup>

Not so easily dismissed, however, is the possibility of conflicts between the two sets of virtues and the question must now be raised as to whether there might be circumstances in which a virtuous agent has to decide between, for instance, displaying either civic courage, understood as mastering the emotion of fear, or kathartic self-control, understood as 'an inward turning to intellect' (6.24-25). To be sure, Plotinus' ideal of godlikeness appears to give him a way of forestalling the problem; 'our concern', we read in the tractate *On Virtues*, 'is not to avoid culpable error (*hamartia*), but to be god.'<sup>15</sup> Again, at the conclusion of the tractate, he notes, not without a touch of grandiloquence, that the man who 'has reached higher principles and different measures' (2.21-22)<sup>16</sup> will act according to these:

... [he] will altogether (*holōs*) separate himself, as far as possible, from his bodily nature and will altogether (*holōs*) dissociate himself from the life of the good man (*ton anthropou bion ton tou agathou*), which civic virtue recommends. He will leave that life behind and choose another, the life of the gods; for it is to them, not to good men, that we are to be made like. (7.23-28, tr. Armstrong, modified)

What Plotinus is referring to here is the moral progression from civic to kathartic virtues. A man who has reached the higher level, he claims, will not choose to return to the life he left behind, preferring instead to follow the 'higher principles and different measures' that Intellect gives to those who have rendered themselves capable of receiving them.<sup>17</sup> The placing and the repetition of *holōs*, unfortunately not fully rendered by Armstrong, are significant: while separation from the body can be only 'so far as possible' - Plotinus is not here urging the *spoudaios* to commit suicide - the higher virtues can be cultivated, and the ideal of god-likeness achieved, while the soul is still in the body.

This particular point is crucial to understanding Plotinus' ethics: since the higher soul in us cannot be harmed by the evil that we are caught up in - a paradox implied by his insistence that the higher soul is 'impassible' - we always remain capable of reaching the ideal of god-

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<sup>14</sup> I 2 [19] 7.1-3.

<sup>15</sup> 6.2-3.

<sup>16</sup> See also the reference to the 'clear principles' given by Intellect in I 3 [20] 5.1-2.

<sup>17</sup> I 3 [20] 5. 1-2

likeness, provided that we succeed in purifying ourselves through the cultivation and practice of the virtues, both civic and kathartic. Noetic contemplation, which these virtues make possible in their different ways is the highest activity of which human beings are capable, an activity which enables them to share, albeit sporadically, in the thinking of Intellect. When engaged in high level contemplation, the *spoudaios* makes himself identical with his higher self and, as Plotinus would argue in a later tractate (VI 8 [39]), is as self-determining and free as an incarnate being can be. Such self-determination is beyond the reach of anyone whose life is led within the confines of the bodily nature and in response to the vicissitudes – personal, social and political - of incarnate existence. Even the actions of the man of civic virtue, who consistently aims at ‘the fine’ (*to kalon*), cannot but be ‘mixed’ since it is only their motive (or willing, *boulēsis*) and quality which lie within the power of the agent. However, to the extent that they stem from a pure motive, they can ‘perhaps’ (*tacha*) be described as free or ‘coming from oneself [the agent]’ (*ta par’ hautou*, VI 8 [39] 5. 7).

Plotinus’ ‘perhaps’ is significant. It follows from his conviction that the function of civic virtue is to cure worldly ills, as opposed to preventing or forestalling them. The intervention of virtue in the world of sense, so he claims, can be justified only by the presence in it of untoward states of affairs such as war, injustice and poverty. Plotinus’ manner of expressing the point is vivid. In a quasi prosopopoeic passage, in which he addresses virtue to ask which life it would prefer, the life of civic virtue or the life of contemplation, he takes it upon himself to speak in its place:

... if someone gave virtue itself the choice whether it would like in order to be active that there should be wars, that it might be brave, and that there should be injustice that it might define what is just and set things in order, and poverty, that it might display its liberality, or to stay quiet because everything was well, it would choose to rest from its practical activities because nothing needed its curative action ... (VI 8[39] 5. 13-19)

We can infer from these lines that Plotinus ascribes instrumental, rather than intrinsic, value to the civic virtues.<sup>18</sup> The civic virtues are to be cultivated for what they make possible, be it the purification of the agent or the removal of iniquity and other evils caused by men, rather than for the value that they hold in and for themselves. Unlike the kathartic virtues, which join the soul in us to the activity of Intellect, the civic virtues help the incarnate soul to

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<sup>18</sup> As already noted in O’Meara (2003:41).



maintain its integrity in the world below. Since the return of the incarnate soul to her origins in Intellect lies at the very core of Plotinus' philosophy of value, it is hardly surprising that the *Enneads* should contain so very few references to civic duties and responsibilities. Plotinian *spoudaioi*, it is clear, are unlikely to descend - or to return - into the cave by choice.<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

Admittedly, the disengagement from public affairs that Plotinus recommends is not total. Far from it. As is evident from the above passage, the *spoudaios*, although not on the look out for opportunities to exercise civic virtues, will nonetheless not shirk the burden of undertaking curative action in the world of sense whenever he is uniquely placed to do so. Yet, even then, he will take care to keep his interventions to a minimum, for fear of compromising his inner freedom and undermining his soul's ability to elevate itself to the Intelligible order. So much is made plain in chapter 6 of the same tractate: 'virtue', Plotinus there writes, 'wishes to be independent by supervising the soul to make it good ... and free', before adding that, when passions and actions are at their most constraining, virtue 'will keep its independence by referring back to itself even here (*kai entautha*)':

οὐ γὰρ τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐφέψεσθαι, οἷον σφίζουσα τὸν κινδυνεύοντα, ἀλλ' εἰ δοκοῖ αὐτῇ, καὶ προῖεμένην τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ζῆν κελεύουσιν προίεσθαι καὶ χρήματα καὶ τέκνα καὶ αὐτὴν πατρίδα, σκοπὸν τὸ καλὸν αὐτῆς ἔχουσιν, ἀλλ' οὐ τὸ εἶναι τῶν ὑπ' αὐτὴν· ὥστε καὶ τὸ ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτεξούσιον καὶ τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν οὐκ εἰς τὸ πράττειν ἀνάγεσθαι οὐδ' εἰς τὴν ἔξω, ἀλλ' εἰς τὴν ἐντὸς ἐνέργειαν καὶ νόησιν καὶ θεωρίαν αὐτῆς τῆς ἀρετῆς. Δεῖ δὲ τὴν ἀρετὴν ταύτην νοῦν τινα λέγειν εἶναι οὐ συναριθμοῦντα τὰ πάθη τὰ δουλωθέντα ἢ μετρηθέντα τῷ λόγῳ· ταῦτα γὰρ ἔοικέ, φησιν, ἐγγὺς τι τείνειν<sup>20</sup> τοῦ σώματος ἔθεσι καὶ ἀσκήσεσι κατορθωθέντα.

<sup>19</sup> O'Meara's suggestion (ibid., 74) that Minos, the legendary king of Crete, may have been 'filled full of lawgiving' (VI 9 [9] 7.25-26) as a consequence of having attained union with the One, is grounded in a possible reading of the lines. Yet, as he himself recognises, it is not the only possible one. So much is clear, not only from Plotinus' use in line 23 of *isōs* (perhaps), but also from the fact that the passage is one of very few in the whole of the *Enneads* where Plotinus shows interest in political and legislative activity. For these reasons, I would hesitate to subscribe to O'Meara's view that a soul, 'having reached divine life', 'may wish to "descend" to return to the exercise of "political" virtue.' (ibid., 43). As Plotinus writes in IV 4 [28] 44. 9-12: '... the practical actions which are caused by our passionate spirit are the result of an irrational impulse (*dia thumon alogōs kinountai*) ... political activity and the pursuit of office (*politeiai de kai archōn orexeis*) have the desire of power in us provoking them.'

<sup>20</sup> The reference is to *Rep.* 518d10: ἐγγὺς τι εἶναι τοῦ σώματος. Is τείνειν in line 24-25 due to a scribal error or a failure of Plotinus' memory?

(... for she [virtue] will not attend to practical affairs, such as saving the person in danger, but, if she should see fit, she will sacrifice this one (*touton*), and enjoin the sacrifice of life, as well as of riches and children, and even of the fatherland. For virtue keeps the fine as its goal, but not the existence of what is subject to her. So that both self-determination in the realm of actions and what is in one's own power do not refer to the acting itself or to external activity, but to the activity of what is within and to the thought and contemplation of virtue itself [i.e. the contemplation that virtue itself engages in]. But one must say of this virtue that she is a kind of intellect, not counting the passions in with her, the passions that are enslaved and brought into measure by reason, for these, as he [Plato] says, seem to be in close relationship with the body since it is by habits and training that they are put right. (VI 8 [39] 6.14-26, my translation)

Before drawing philosophical conclusions from these lines, which turn out to be directly relevant to the interpretation of both Plotinus' ethics and his views on suicide, the syntax of the passage needs attending to. This is all the more so since the reading that is grammatically the most likely, if perhaps not the only one possible, turns out to be counter-intuitive to modern readers.

At first sight, the passage contains two ambiguities. First ambiguity: how much detachment from practical affairs is Plotinus advocating here? Who exactly is the man in danger? What is he in danger of? Whose life is to be forsaken? Is it the life of the virtuous agent himself or the life of someone else? Second ambiguity: what does Plotinus mean when he makes virtue enjoin the virtuous to sacrifice his children and his country? Is the virtuous merely urged to forgo the comfort of his children's presence, and to choose exile rather than, say, a dishonourable existence in his native land? Or, more drastically, does Plotinus mean that virtue's advice to the virtuous man would be to refrain from intervening and thereby sacrifice the life of his children and the security of his country to the preservation of his soul's purity and independence from the world below?

These ambiguities give us three possible readings. Let us first concentrate on the reading that is the most likely, from both a grammatical and a philosophical point of view. Taking grammar first, the demonstrative *touton* (line 16) cannot but refer back to *ton kinduneuonta* ('someone in danger', line 15). This being so, the man in danger is the agent himself or, more precisely, the body with which the soul of the agent is conjoined at the time.

By referring to the body as *ton kinduneuonta*, Plotinus uses style, rather subtly, to point to the otherness of what is in danger: the body, the empirical self, which is other than the real self of the agent.<sup>21</sup> If the circumstances warrant it, virtue will enjoin (*keleuein*) the agent to forsake this body (*touton*), which is an essential component of his empirical self, but not of his higher, true, self.

From virtue's command, so interpreted, the rest of the sentence follows naturally. The object of *proiesthai*, namely *to dzen*, refers to the life of the agent himself: forsaking his own body, he must forsake his bodily life itself. Letting go of his bodily life, he must, in turn, let go of his material possessions as well as, more grievously, his relationship with his children. From a philosophical point of view, this reading is in line with Plotinus' teaching that the death of the body is a lesser evil for the virtuous person than the subordination of his soul to the body's instinct for survival, an instinct that, in an arresting passage, Plotinus ascribes to an enchantment (*goēteia*) worked 'by the force of human nature.'<sup>22</sup> The reading also tallies with the relatively low value that Plotinus places upon personal relationships.<sup>23</sup> The principal aim of virtue, in Plotinus' scheme of things, is to secure 'the fine' (*to kalon*) for herself (ll. 17-18), as opposed to the good of 'what is subject to her' (l. 18). Indeed, 'what is subject to her' is external and, as such, not entirely within her control and remit. Of all of this - riches, the fatherland, children, bodily life itself - the Plotinian sage must let go. And he must do so in the name of moral norms higher than those embodied in the civic virtues. So much is clear from lines 21-22 in which it is specified that the activity proper to higher virtue, here described as a 'kind of intellect' (νοῦς τις), consists in thought and contemplation, and not - emphatically not - the subjection of the passions. Indeed, the genitive in line 22, namely αὐτῆς τῆς ἀρετῆς, which depends on θεωρίαν, cannot but be a subjective genitive, that is, a genitive that refers to the subject, as opposed to the object, of the clause in question. In this case, therefore, the genitive refers to the activity that ἀρετή, the higher virtue (referred to again later on the same line by τὴν ἀρετὴν ταύτην), engages in, namely θεωρία.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bréhier's rather free translation of the subordinate clause in ll. 15-16 as 's'il lui [à la vertu] semble bon, elle ne sauve pas le corps en péril' makes it clear that his reading of the sentence is the same as the one defended here. Lavaud (2007) translates similarly.

<sup>22</sup> IV 4 [28] 44. 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> In II 9 [33] 16, Plotinus distances himself from the conception of friendship and its attendant obligations that contemporary moral philosophers describe as 'particularistic' when he argues that love, rather than being focused on particular individuals such as relatives and friends, should extend to all those who are akin (*suggenēs*) to those one loves, namely to each and every individual soul since 'every soul is a child of the Father'. On this issue, see also I 4 [46] 7. For the categorisation of pity (*eleos*) as a vice (*kakia*), see I 1 [53] 10.

<sup>24</sup> See Goodwin (1894: 1084.2).

According to a second interpretation, *ton kinduneuonta*, as well as *touton*, would refer to some chance person other than the agent. Virtue would then advise the agent, not only to refrain from saving the life of another, but also to forsake his own life, as well as his material possessions, his children, and his native country. To sustain this interpretation would require interpreting the two forms of *proiēmi* (to sacrifice), which are both in the middle voice, close together and linked by a *kai*, as having different lives as their object, in the first case a person other than the agent, in the second case the agent himself. Although perhaps not grammatically impossible, this construction is needlessly tortuous. Moreover, it has the disadvantage of going against the grain of Plotinus' argument in chapter 5 of the same tractate (VI 8). For, as noted above, the lesson of lines 13 to 20 of that chapter is that the virtuous will not shirk his responsibilities in the world of sense. Although virtue is always reluctant to get involved in the contingencies of practical life, it nevertheless does get involved in them when necessary. The virtuous agent, Plotinus suggests in that chapter, will act bravely whenever there is a war, just as he will seek to redress injustice when crying injustice is facing him, and give generously to the needy when their poverty imposes itself upon his attention. If Plotinus had thought that the virtuous should abstain from intervening altogether, he would not have described the engagement of virtue in practical affairs as reluctant. It may well be that this particular mis-reading of the passage has contributed to the dismay felt by many a reader of the *Enneads* at Plotinus' apparent indifference to the plight of common humanity.

A third interpretation of these lines must be mentioned, if only to be summarily dismissed. It could just about be claimed, solely on the basis of the grammar of the passage, that virtue's advice to the virtuous would be actively to sacrifice the life of his children, that is to kill them, in the interest of the *kalon* (lines 16-18). Exegetically speaking, however, this third interpretation is to be ruled out by the context, in which it is specified that the lower, or civic, virtues are to intervene to resolve precisely this kind of crisis. Indeed, from a philosophical point of view, this third interpretation is too impossibly strained to warrant further examination.

To conclude: the first interpretation of the lines in question, which, as I hope to have shown, is the only interpretation possible, adds a decisive element to the debate over Plotinus' views on suicide. The lines bring together two tenets which came to be central to

his philosophy, namely the thesis that the higher soul in us cannot be harmed by the evil we get caught up in and the thesis that the higher form of virtue, which intellectualises the soul, keeps its independence even in the midst of circumstances which would compel a weaker soul.<sup>25</sup> Combined, these tenets yield the conclusion that virtue will not follow the lead of the facts, either internal or external to the agent, and that it will keep its own counsel however calamitous the consequences may turn out to be. To drive the point home, Plotinus spells out just how calamitous they might be for the man of virtue, who stands to lose possessions, fatherland, children, life itself. Unfortunately, we are not given examples either of circumstances which would warrant the kind of sacrifice Plotinus is here alluding to or indeed of men who have consented to such a sacrifice. Could the steersman of *Ennead* IV 3 [27], whom Plotinus castigates for caring more for his vessel than for his soul, be an example of how a man of virtue should not act, even when in danger of losing his life?<sup>26</sup> Was the memory of Cato of Utica, long held to be a Roman paradigm of Stoic virtue, still alive in Plotinus' time and circle? If it was, could Cato, who chose to kill himself rather than submit to what he perceived to be Caesar's tyrannical rule, have been for Plotinus an example of suicide committed for the sake of preserving the integrity of the self?<sup>27</sup> Whatever paradigm of heroic suicide Plotinus may have had in mind at this point, one thing is certain: notwithstanding the objections that he had earlier levelled at suicide, he had come to regard it, by the time he wrote VI 8 [39], as a legitimate way out of external circumstances which would otherwise be likely to compromise the integrity and independence of the higher self. So much had already been noted by Dillon (1994). The additional contribution that the above-quoted lines make to the issue is to show that the circumstances in which Plotinus would condone suicide include, not only those in which the agent, being fatally ill or in danger of being captured as a war-slave, has no other way out, but also those in which he has no other *honourable* way out. While Cato knew that Caesar would have pardoned him, he chose to kill himself rather than compromise his principles. *Pace* Rist, therefore, I conclude

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<sup>25</sup> See VI 8 [39] 5.

<sup>26</sup> '... just as the steersmen of ships in a storm concentrate more and more on the care of their ships and are unaware that they are *forgetting themselves*, that they are in danger of being *dragged down* with the wreck of the ships, these souls incline downwards more with what is theirs. Then they are held *fettered* with bonds of magic, held fast by their care (*kēdemonia*) for the bodily nature.' (IV 3 [27] 17. 22-28).

<sup>27</sup> It might be assumed that Plotinus is here thinking of Socrates. There are two reasons for which such an assumption would be unwarranted. First, although Socrates died by his own hand, he had judicially been condemned to do so. Secondly, to allege that his death was freely consented to on the ground that he could have escaped into exile would be tantamount to confuse suicide and martyrdom. For the background to the controversy surrounding the description of Socrates' manner of death, see Stern-Gillet (1987).

that, by the time Plotinus came to write VI 8 [39], self-inflicted death in the name of virtue had his approval.

## V

It is often remarked that Plotinus' discussion of free will and action in VI 8 [39] owes much to Aristotelian and, even more so, to Stoic treatments of the issue.<sup>28</sup> The Stoic influence is plain in so far as there are striking parallels between, on the one hand, the Stoic view that human beings are part of a causal chain over which they have limited control and, on the other hand, Plotinus' claim that, at the level of action (*praxis*), human self-determination can go no further than the forming of intentions and that moral responsibility should not therefore be extended beyond the quality of the action performed.<sup>29</sup> What, by contrast, seems to have escaped scholarly attention is the Aristotelian flavour of this particular passage. This is all the more suprising as there are significant verbal parallels between the above-quoted lines and the passage in book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle draws normative conclusions from his distinction between noble and ignoble self-love (*philautia*). While noble self-love is the regard that virtuous agents have for the highest element in themselves, namely reason, ignoble self-love leads the unvirtuous many to seize for themselves a disproportionately large share of whatever competitive goods happen to be available. Noble self-love so conceived, Aristotle points out, entails exacting moral norms, which may require of the *spoudaios*, not only that he abandon his claim to a variety of competitive goods, but also that, in extreme circumstances, he be ready to die for others. Because he was conscious of the paradox entailed by his conclusion that noble self-love may require the forsaking of the self, Aristotle argued that the losses consented in the name of the highest element in oneself would be more than compensated by the gaining of the greatest of all goods, namely *to kalon*.

As he wrote:

ἀληθὲς δὲ περὶ τοῦ σπουδαίου καὶ τὸ τῶν φίλων ἕνεκα πολλὰ πράττειν καὶ τῆς πατρίδος, κἂν δέη ὑπεραποθνήσκειν· **προήσεται** γὰρ καὶ **χρήματα** καὶ τιμὰς καὶ ὅλως τὰ περιμάχητα ἀγαθὰ, περιποιούμενος ἑαυτῷ τὸ καλόν· ... τοῖς δ' ὑπεραποθνήσκουσι τοῦτ' ἴσως συμβαίνει· αἰροῦνται δὴ μέγα **καλόν** ἑαυτοῖς. καὶ **χρήματα προοῖντ'** ἂν ἐφ' ᾧ πλείονα λήψονται οἱ φίλοι· γίνεται γὰρ τῷ μὲν φίλῳ **χρήματα**, αὐτῷ δὲ **τὸ καλόν**· τὸ δὴ μείζον ἀγαθὸν ἑαυτῷ ἀπονέμει. καὶ περὶ τιμὰς δὲ καὶ ἀρχὰς ὁ αὐτὸς τρόπος· πάντα γὰρ τῷ φίλῳ ταῦτα **προήσεται**· καλὸν γὰρ αὐτῷ τοῦτο καὶ ἐπαινετόν.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., the *index fontium* in H-S<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> As explained in VI 8 [39] 5. For a detailed analysis of this particular issue, see Graeser (1972: 112-126).

(IX.8, 1169a18-b1)

... it is true that the excellent person labours for his friends and for his native country, and will die for them if need be; he will sacrifice money, honours and contested goods in general, in achieving what is fine for himself ... This is presumably true of one who dies for others; he does indeed choose something great and fine for himself. He is ready to sacrifice money as long as his friends profit; for the friends gain money, while he gains what is fine, and so he awards himself the greater good. He treats honours and offices the same way; for he will sacrifice them all for his friends, since this is fine and praiseworthy for him. (tr. T. Irwin, modified)

The parallels between this passage and the Plotinian lines are unmistakeable. On the lexical level, the significant similarities in the choice of words include the use of *proiēmi* (to sacrifice), which although relatively frequent in Aristotle, is infrequent in this sense in Plotinus,<sup>30</sup> *chrēmata* (riches), *patris* (native country), a rare word in both authors, and *to kalon* (the fine). Even more striking, from a philosophical point of view, is the fact that both authors use the same words to commend those *spoudaioi* whose suicide is motivated by the desire to preserve the integrity of the highest element in themselves. Lastly, ‘the fine’ (*to kalon*) is the prize that both philosophers would award to the *spoudaios* who, resisting the promptings of his bodily nature, does not regard death as the ultimate evil. These parallels make it highly unlikely that Plotinus should not have been familiar with the *Nicomachean* lines. So striking indeed are these parallels that it is surprising not to see them recorded in the *index fontium* in H-S<sup>2</sup>.

The similarities between the two passages should not, however, blind us to the existence of highly significant dissimilarities between them. To ground their conviction that, in extreme circumstances, the *spoudaios* will consent to the ultimate self-sacrifice, the two philosophers use radically different arguments. Aristotle rests his case upon considerations of benevolence, describing virtuous self-sacrifice as benefiting the agent’s *philoī* and *polis*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Sleeman and Pollet (1980: s.v.); so far as I can see, the only other Plotinian use of *proiēmi* in this sense is in III 2 [47] 9.11.

<sup>31</sup> A point that Aristotle had already emphasized earlier when he noted that ‘... when everyone competes to achieve what is fine and strains to do the finest actions, everything that is right will be done for the common good, and each person individually will receive the greatest of goods since that is the character of virtue’ (*E.N.*, IX.8, 1169a8-11, tr. Irwin).

And if it may seem, *prima facie*, that he presents the *kalon* as a good that compensates the virtuous for the sacrifice he readily consents to, a more careful reading of the text shows that the *kalon*, far from being taken to be the presiding motive of self-sacrifice, is but its (posthumous) consequence. Plotinus' handling of the theme of virtuous suicide departs from Aristotle's own in one noteworthy respect: it contains no mention of the kind of altruistic or other-regarding considerations that dominate Aristotle's own account. This particular point is crucial to the understanding of Plotinus ethics. The *spoudaios* of the *Enneads* forsakes what he does forsake, not in order to benefit others, but in order to preserve the independence of his soul and to protect her against the demands that adventitious circumstances in the world of sense would otherwise make upon her. In identifying himself with his higher, other-worldly, self, the *spoudaios* of the *Enneads* manifests its self-love by detaching himself, not only from material possessions and earthly ties, but also from bodily life itself. Although he will not refuse to intervene in the world of practical affairs whenever he is in a position to help curing the evils therein, his involvement will always be reluctant and circumspect. Rather than seeking to alleviate, or to forestall, the 'evils down here', he will choose, whenever possible, to 'flee from them.'<sup>32</sup>

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